

SHENKMAN & HUGHES, PC

Attorneys

Malibu, California

28905 Wight Road  
Malibu, California 90265  
(310) 457-0970

[kishenkman@shenkmanhughes.com](mailto:kishenkman@shenkmanhughes.com)

VIA CERTIFIED MAIL

February 28, 2018

City Clerk - Jessica Blair  
City of Half Moon Bay  
501 Main Street  
Half Moon Bay, CA 94019

*Re: Violation of California Voting Rights Act*

I write on behalf of our client, Southwest Voter Registration Education Project and its members. The City of Half Moon Bay (“Half Moon Bay” or the “City”) relies upon an at-large election system for electing candidates to its City Council. Moreover, voting within Half Moon Bay is racially polarized, resulting in minority vote dilution, and, therefore, the City’s at-large elections violate the California Voting Rights Act of 2001 (“CVRA”).

The CVRA disfavors the use of so-called “at-large” voting – an election method that permits voters of an entire jurisdiction to elect candidates to each open seat. *See generally Sanchez v. City of Modesto* (2006) 145 Cal.App.4<sup>th</sup> 660, 667 (“*Sanchez*”). For example, if the U.S. Congress were elected through a nationwide at-large election, rather than through typical single-member districts, each voter could cast up to 435 votes and vote for any candidate in the country, not just the candidates in the voter’s district, and the 435 candidates receiving the most nationwide votes would be elected. At-large elections thus allow a bare majority of voters to control *every* seat, not just the seats in a particular district or a proportional majority of seats.

Voting rights advocates have targeted “at-large” election schemes for decades, because they often result in “vote dilution,” or the impairment of minority groups’ ability to elect their preferred candidates or influence the outcome of elections, which occurs when the electorate votes in a racially polarized manner. *See Thornburg v. Gingles*, 478 U.S. 30, 46 (1986) (“*Gingles*”). The U.S. Supreme Court “has long recognized that multi-member districts and at-large voting schemes may operate to minimize or cancel out the voting strength” of minorities. *Id.* at 47; *see also id.* at 48, fn. 14 (at-large elections may also cause elected officials to “ignore [minority] interests without fear of political consequences”), citing *Rogers v. Lodge*, 458 U.S. 613, 623 (1982); *White v. Register*, 412 U.S. 755, 769 (1973). “[T]he majority, by virtue of its numerical superiority, will

regularly defeat the choices of minority voters.” *Gingles*, at 47. When racially polarized voting occurs, dividing the political unit into single-member districts, or some other appropriate remedy, may facilitate a minority group's ability to elect its preferred representatives. *Rogers*, at 616.

Section 2 of the federal Voting Rights Act (“FVRA”), 42 U.S.C. § 1973, which Congress enacted in 1965 and amended in 1982, targets, among other things, at-large election schemes. *Gingles* at 37; see also Boyd & Markman, *The 1982 Amendments to the Voting Rights Act: A Legislative History* (1983) 40 Wash. & Lee L. Rev. 1347, 1402. Although enforcement of the FVRA was successful in many states, California was an exception. By enacting the CVRA, “[t]he Legislature intended to expand protections against vote dilution over those provided by the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965.” *Jauregui v. City of Palmdale* (2014) 226 Cal. App. 4<sup>th</sup> 781, 808. Thus, while the CVRA is similar to the FVRA in several respects, it is also different in several key respects, as the Legislature sought to remedy what it considered “restrictive interpretations given to the federal act.” Assem. Com. on Judiciary, Analysis of Sen. Bill No. 976 (2001-2002 Reg. Sess.) as amended Apr. 9, 2002, p. 2.

The California Legislature dispensed with the requirement in *Gingles* that a minority group demonstrate that it is sufficiently large and geographically compact to constitute a “majority-minority district.” *Sanchez*, at 669. Rather, the CVRA requires only that a plaintiff show the existence of racially polarized voting to establish that an at-large method of election violates the CVRA, not the desirability of any particular remedy. See Cal. Elec. Code § 14028 (“A violation of Section 14027 *is established* if it is shown that racially polarized voting occurs ...”) (emphasis added); also see Assem. Com. on Judiciary, Analysis of Sen. Bill No. 976 (2001–2002 Reg. Sess.) as amended Apr. 9, 2002, p. 3 (“Thus, this bill puts the voting rights horse (the discrimination issue) back where it sensibly belongs in front of the cart (what type of remedy is appropriate once racially polarized voting has been shown).”)

To establish a violation of the CVRA, a plaintiff must generally show that “racially polarized voting occurs in elections for members of the governing body of the political subdivision or in elections incorporating other electoral choices by the voters of the political subdivision.” Elec. Code § 14028(a). The CVRA specifies the elections that are most probative: “elections in which at least one candidate is a member of a protected class or elections involving ballot measures, or other electoral choices that affect the rights and privileges of members of a protected class.” Elec. Code § 14028(a). The CVRA also makes clear that “[e]lections conducted prior to the filing of an action ... are more probative to establish the existence of racially polarized voting than elections conducted after the filing of the action.” *Id.*



Factors other than “racially polarized voting” that are required to make out a claim under the FVRA – under the “totality of the circumstances” test – “are probative, but not necessary factors to establish a violation of” the CVRA. Elec. Code § 14028(e). These “other factors” include “the history of discrimination, the use of electoral devices or other voting practices or procedures that may enhance the dilutive effects of at-large elections, denial of access to those processes determining which groups of candidates will receive financial or other support in a given election, the extent to which members of a protected class bear the effects of past discrimination in areas such as education, employment, and health, which hinder their ability to participate effectively in the political process, and the use of overt or subtle racial appeals in political campaigns.” *Id.*

Half Moon Bay’s at-large system of electing its city council dilutes the ability of Latinos (a “protected class”) – to elect candidates of their choice or otherwise influence the outcome of the City’s council elections.

The City’s election history is illustrative: during the past 20 years, there has been only one (1) Latino/a that has emerged as a candidate for the Half Moon Bay City Council. Opponents of fair, district-based elections may attribute the lack of Latinos vying for elected positions to a lack of interest in local government from the Latino community. On the contrary, the alarming absence of Latino candidates seeking election to the Half Moon Bay City Council reveals vote dilution. *See Westwego Citizens for Better Government v. City of Westwego*, 872 F. 2d 1201, 1208-1209, n. 9 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1989). That one Latina candidate, Eliana Rivera, enjoyed significant support from the Latino community but was defeated due to the bloc voting of the non-Latino electorate.

As of the 2010 Census, the City of Half Moon Bay has a population of 11,324. According to recent data, Latinos comprise approximately 31.5% of the City’s population. However, for the past 20 years there has not been a single Latino/a to actually serve on the Half Moon Bay City Council. In that entire 20-year period only one Latina – Eliana Rivera – emerged as a candidate in 2001, but was unable to secure a seat on the City Council. Therefore, not only is the contrast between the significant Latino proportion of the electorate and the total absence of Latinos to run for or be elected to the Half Moon Bay’s City Council outwardly disturbing, it is also fundamentally hostile towards Latino participation.

The lack of representation for Latinos has been a long-standing issue for the City of Half Moon Bay. Tensions in the City have historically been high amongst Latino residents who feel that they do not have a voice in City governance. This fact became especially evident in 2014, when 18-year-old Yanira Serrano-Garcia, a mentally ill Hispanic teenager, was shot and killed by a San Mateo sheriff’s deputy in Half Moon Bay. The shooting took place at Moonridge Housing Complex which houses many of the areas agricultural workers, most of whom are Latino. This incident sparked outrage across the

Latino community. In fact, in the aftermath of the shooting, Yanira's brother said, "as a member of the (Serrano) family we have seen nothing from the government...and for the community of Moonridge we don't see services, we don't see support." Sadly, to date, little has changed in terms of the Latino representation in the City of Half Moon Bay.

As you may be aware, in 2012, we sued the City of Palmdale for violating the CVRA. After an eight-day trial, we prevailed. After spending millions of dollars, a district-based remedy was ultimately imposed upon the Palmdale city council, with districts that combine all incumbents into one of the four districts.

Given the historical lack of Latino representation on the Half Moon Bay City Council in the context of racially polarized elections, we urge the City to voluntarily change its at-large system of electing City Council members. Otherwise, on behalf of residents within the jurisdiction, we will be forced to seek judicial relief. Please advise us no later than April 20, 2018 as to whether you would like to discuss a voluntary change to your current at-large system.

We look forward to your response.

Very truly yours,



Kevin I. Shenkman